



Illinois English Bulletin

Grading Lincoln's Themes

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Grading Lincoln's Themes

BY LLOYD DUNLAP

It is probably safe to assume that most of you have been reminded a few hundred times that the sesquicentennial anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln is being celebrated this year. The prairie paragon is having a birthday party which may well be the most extended, far-flung, and—perhaps—significant celebration that has ever been held in honor of an American. He has been eulogized in great legislative bodies, dissected and analyzed and interpreted in famous universities, and quoted and praised at literally thousands of gatherings. In homage to his memory, men have written books, carved statues, produced movies, grown beards, and traveled on flatboats down the Ohio River. From the halls of Congress to grass shacks in Africa, people throughout the free world have come together to hear other people talk about this great and unique man. From another point of view, I suppose, this is another way of saying that a lot of words about Lincoln have already been spoken this year. Put together they would certainly make for a long evening. After that introduction, it requires a truly callous nature to state boldly that I propose to add a few words to what is already a formidable total.

To be tendered an invitation to talk about Lincoln in Illinois, and especially in Urbana, presents a situation in which elements

Few talks at our annual meetings have been so inspired, have brought forth such unanimous approval as "Grading Lincoln's Themes" by Lloyd Dunlap. We are fortunate to share his research with all of you. Mr. Dunlap is one of the country's outstanding Lincoln authorities. With Roy P. Basler, and Marion D. Pratt, he edited THE COLLECTED WORKS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN in eight volumes. At present Mr. Dunlap is Consultant in Lincoln Studies of the Library of Congress.

of challenge, presumption, and vanity are about equally mixed. A very great deal of what we know of Lincoln has come from within a few miles of this place, and I am now uncomfortably aware of those words about carrying coals to Newcastle. But to be here is a pleasure. To speak here, I assure you, is indeed an honor.

Considering the nature of this occasion, and my own inclinations as a fugitive from an English classroom, it seems to me that some observations about Lincoln as a student might be appropriate. I ask your indulgence, therefore, in assuming that the title, "Grading Lincoln's Themes," is broad enough to cover words which might be more aptly headed—"A. Lincoln—Pupil."

There would be considerable agreement, I think, among those who study Lincoln that one of the most remarkable characteristics of this most remarkable man was his capacity for growth. His development was constant and astounding. In this respect, it could be argued that Lincoln was a learner throughout his life. Conjectures tonight, however, will not be upon how he acquired the artistry and genius he exhibited in the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural. In their stead, I propose to substitute some guesses—for guesses they are—as to where, and when, and how he learned his "Three 'R's." Or, in deference to educators, "How he acquired the basic skills."

What we know of Lincoln's education, for that is, after all, what we are considering, stems from two sources: the first is the few—the very few—words which Lincoln wrote on the subject; the second is what other people remembered, or said they remembered, about it. The first is laconic, completely matter of fact, and basic. The second is replete with anecdote, alive with interest, and filled with pitfalls and contradictions. It is to be read and used with caution. Much of it may be true; some of it is probably not true; and some of it "just ain't so."

Beginning where Lincoln began, what do we know about how he acquired the most basic of the skills—reading and writing? How did Lincoln learn? Who taught him? Lincoln himself is silent beyond stating simply that in Kentucky "he and his sister were sent for short periods, to A.B.C. schools, the first kept by Zachariah Riney, and the second by Caleb Hazel." Later, in Indiana, he attended briefly three other schools. These words and some manuscripts dating from the 1820's which prove that he could then write well and presumably read, constitute the only solid evidence. With these facts, perhaps we should be content, and recognize that Lincoln's formal schooling—less than a year in the aggregate, he

said—was probably much the same in duration and quality as that received by the majority of frontier youth. Perhaps a teacher had something to do with his learning to read and to write.

There lived in Springfield, however, a man who wanted to write a book—the book about Lincoln. This, of course, was William H. Herndon who set himself the task of collecting all the evidence he could amass concerning the early life of Lincoln. With a missionary's zeal, commendable patience, indefatigable industry, and a sometimes lamentable lack of discrimination, he compiled an imposing mass of reminiscence, anecdote, and fact that has been the delight and despair of succeeding generations of Lincoln writers. From his labors have come the detail and elaborations of the story of Lincoln's education.

Among his informants, none was more colorful or garrulous than Dennis F. Hanks. His memory was amazingly retentive, truly accommodating, and appallingly erratic. As a cousin of Nancy Hanks who had lived in the Lincoln household, he quickly established himself as the final and complete authority on Lincoln's childhood. According to him, the home, not the school, was the scene of Lincoln's early learning. He wrote:

About Abes early education and his sisters education let me say this—Their mother first learned their a b c's and their a b's. She learned them this out of Websters old spelling book; it belonged to me & cost in those days 75¢, it being covered with calf skin—or such like covering. I taught Abe his first lesson in spelling—reading & writing—I taught Abe to write with a buzzards quill which I killed with a rifle having made a pen—put Abes hand in mine & moving his fingers by my hand to give the idea of how to write—

Did Lincoln's mother teach him his ABC's? Maybe so. Perhaps a proven inability to write her own name did not necessarily exclude her from the tutorial ranks, but I suggest that it must have been a considerable handicap. Did Dennis Hanks teach Lincoln to write and to read? Again, maybe so. But there must have been difficulties. For according to Hanks, "Abe had no books in Kentucky," and "Abraham learned to write So that we could understand it in 1821." I should dislike believing that the young Abraham was such a slow learner. Unfortunately, too, the only authority for the statement that Dennis F. Hanks taught Lincoln to read, to spell, and to write, is Dennis F. Hanks. To that, I add only the comment that if the statement is true, Lincoln scholars must be eternally grateful that the pupil's spelling and handwriting abilities progressed beyond those of his teacher.

The mists surrounding this phase of Lincoln's education remain undisputed and impenetrable. Who taught Lincoln to read?

No one knows for sure. Who taught him to write? Again, no one knows.

Concerning the third of the three R's, there is more evidence. The traditional picture of Lincoln doing his sums with charcoal on a board before a fireplace may be true. I have only one reservation—completely physical. A fire gives not only light, but also heat.

But be that as it may, there have come down to us ten pages from what is called "Lincoln's Sum Book." These are sheets of paper containing rules and examples in arithmetic written down by Lincoln and once stitched together to form a rough copy book. Hanks modestly takes no credit for teaching Lincoln to add or subtract, but he was, as usual, involved. In this case, he bought the paper and, in his words, "gave it to Abe." Herndon acquired the book in 1866 and from him came the tradition that Lincoln, too poor to own a copy of Nicholas Pike's *Arithmetic*, had copied rules and illustrations from that volume and thus, in effect, taught himself.

An examination of these sheets and a comparison of their rules and examples with frontier arithmetics reveal two things: First there is nothing on them which can be directly traced to Pike's book. To the contrary, much of the material on these pages comes from an arithmetic compiled by Thomas Dilworth, entitled *The Schoolmaster's Assistant*. Second, these pages contain material from more than one text. Since it is highly unlikely that Lincoln ever owned one arithmetic, let alone several, the inescapable conclusion is that, in this case, a teacher had something to do with Lincoln's learning. Many frontier teachers taught without a textbook, using instead copybooks which they had, in turn, assembled from their teachers. From all indications, Lincoln's sum book is a reproduction of a similar book compiled by one, or perhaps all of his teachers in Indiana—Andrew Crawford, James Swaney, and Azel Dorsey. Perhaps these teachers had more to do with Lincoln's education than has popularly been supposed.

In writing an autobiographical sketch in the early summer of 1860, Lincoln said: "After he was twentythree, and had separated from his father, he studied English grammar, imperfectly of course, but so as to speak and write as well as he now does. . . ." The location, of course, was New Salem; the year was 1832; and the book was by one Samuel Kirkham. It bore the formidable title of *English Grammar in Familiar Lectures, Accompanied by a Compendium; Embracing a New Systematick Order of Parsing, a New System of Punctuation, Exercises in False Syntax, and a*

Key to the Exercises. Designed for the Use of Schools and Private Learners. . . . Sixth Edition, Enlarged and much Improved. Cincinnati: N & G. Guilford, 1829."

If there is a paucity of statements surrounding Lincoln's struggles with the tools of learning, there is an abundance of riches concerning this plunge into the study of the niceties of the language originally taught him by Nancy Hanks, or Dennis Hanks, or Zachariah Riney, or another teacher, or somebody whom Herndon or the neighbors overlooked.

There are two sets of recollections of how Lincoln studied grammar. The first were given to James Quay Howard in the summer of 1860 when he was gathering material for the campaign biography written by William Dean Howells. The second were those gathered by the energetic Mr. Herndon five years later.

The first claimant to having participated in Lincoln's beginnings as a grammarian was one William G. Greene, (who bore the sobriquet of "Slicky Bill"). To Mr. Howard he was brief and to the point: "2 or 3 mos. after he landed [in New Salem] said he would study grammar—good practical grammarian in three weeks." For Mr. Herndon he provided more detail:

Soon after he landed and commenced clerking he took a notion to study grammar & surveying. I told him I had a grammar & surveying books at home. This remember was in the summer & fall of 1830. He went down with me and got them and instantly commenced his studies. Mr. Lincoln studied the grammar & surveying privately in his store—worked it out by himself alone as I recollect it, though others may have explained special problems—rules and such like things which he could not easily master. Mr. Lincoln soon mastered his grammar & the general rules . . . of surveying He mastered them rapidly—like reading—so quick and comprehensive was his mind.

Aside from confusing dates, Mr. Greene's story of Lincoln and grammar is a relatively simple one. He loaned him a book and Lincoln began work.

Among certain of Herndon's informants there came to be a sort of contest as to who could remember the most about Lincoln and from a New Salem teacher, named appropriately enough, Mentor Graham, came a conflicting story. To Mr. Howard, Graham gave this account: "When L. was about 22 said he believed he must study Grammar—one could not be obtained in the neighborhood—walked for 8 miles and borrowed Kirkham's old Grammar." As usual, Mr. Herndon received a more elaborate version:

In the month of February A.D. 1833 Mr. Lincoln came and lived with me & continued with me about six months. It was here that he commenced the study of English Grammer (*sic*) with me. I was then

teaching school. . . . Mr. Lincoln spoke to me one day and said 'I have a notion of studying English grammar.' I replied to him thus 'If you expect to go before the public in any capacity I think it the best thing you can do.' He said to me, 'If I had a grammar I would commence now.' There was none in the village & I said to him—'I know of a grammar at one Vances about 6 miles' which I thought he could get. He was then at breakfast—ate—got up and went on foot to Vances & got the Book. He soon came back & told me he had it. He then turned his immediate & almost undivided attention to English Grammar. The book was Kirkham's grammar—an old volume—which I suppose—have so heard—is in the Rutledge family to-day. During the spring-summer & fall he read law—studied and practiced surveying and the grammar & would recite to me in the evening. I have taught in my life four or six thousand people as school master and no one ever surpassed him in rapidly—quickly & well acquiring the rudiments and rules of English grammar.

"Slicky Bill," however, maintained that the genius of Lincoln was such that he needed no guide through the intricacies of Kirkham's work. To Herndon he wrote: "I still persist in the assertion that Mr. Lincoln had no Teacher after he came to New Salem (;) that he was self Taught. . . . I have seen Graham since I rec'd your letter (.) he still persisted that he taught him but when I questioned him wher [sic] when & what school house he had to admit that it was on the street, behind the counter when at dinner &c &c. . . ."

And so the question was: Did Lincoln learn grammar with, or without a teacher? To that must be added a further complication—another Greene, Lynn McNulty, maintained that he taught Lincoln, informing Howard that "Every time I went to Salem, he took me out on the hill and got me to explain to him Kirkham." To Herndon he said:

In the summer after he came home from the Black Hawk War he got possession of one [of] Kirkham's Grammers (*sic*) & began studying it on the hill sides of old Salem. I spent several days giving him instruction in this manner. In fact all the instruction he ever had in Grammer [sic] he rec'd from me.

Whatever else may be said of Lincoln's New Salem studies, there was no absence of tutors. Indeed he may have assembled a small faculty there for yet another man claimed he had given him assistance. Dr. Jason Duncan told Herndon, with somewhat more modesty than his fellows:

I first went to reside in New Salem in A.D. 1831. . . . I became acquainted with Abraham Lincoln . . . shortly after my arrival . . . the winter following Abraham requested me to aid him in the study of English Grammar which I consented to do to the extent of my limited ability. his application through the winter was assiduous

and untiring, he seemed to master the construction of the english language and apply the rules for the same in a most astonishing manner.

Again we have a choice of beliefs; again the proven facts are few. Lincoln studied Kirkham's Grammar, this we know, but under what circumstances and with what assistance we know not. Perhaps the most significant evidence is negative in nature. In the copy of the campaign biography prepared by William Dean Howells, which Lincoln himself corrected, the mention of a long walk to borrow a copy of the book and Lynn Greene's version of the hillside instruction were left unmarked.

In these days when, in certain areas at least, grammar is a word to be whispered and administered only in more palatable disguises and blandishments, it is pleasant to reflect that there was once a time when it was more in fashion. The pedagogical heaven must surely contain students willing, not only to study grammar, but, like Lincoln, willing to walk miles to borrow a textbook.

Kirkham's book, to judge from the number of editions it went through, was popular during the first half of the nineteenth century; and is, in many of its rules and prescriptions, not greatly different from English handbooks in use today. This statement has a distinctly modern flavor: "The established practice of the best speakers and writers of any language is the standard of grammatical accuracy in the use of that language." There is a missionary zeal, however, which is usually lacking today.

If Lincoln began at the beginning, and there is certainly no reason to assume that he didn't, he read these words directed, and I quote, "To the Young Learner."

You are about to enter one of the most useful, and when rightly pursued, one of the most interesting studies in the whole circle of science. If, however, you like many a misguided youth, are under the impression that the study of grammar is dry and irksome, and a matter of little consequence, I trust I shall succeed in removing from your mind, all such false notions and ungrounded prejudices; for I will endeavour to convince you, before I close these lectures, that this is not only a pleasing study, but one of real and substantial utility; a study that directly tends to adorn and dignify human nature, and meliorate the condition of man. Grammar is a leading branch of that learning which alone is capable of unfolding and maturing the mental powers, and of elevating man to his proper rank in the scale of intellectual existence;—of that learning which lifts the soul from earth, and enables it to hold converse with a thousand worlds. . . .

Twelve pages later, when perhaps he was a little discouraged and bogged down, Lincoln was exposed to a pep talk:

You are aware, my young friend, that you live in an age of light and knowledge;—an age in which science and the arts are marching onward with gigantick strides. You live, too, in a land of liberty. . . . These considerations forbid that you should ever be so unmindful of your duty to your country, to your Creator, to yourself, and to succeeding generations, as to be content to grovel in ignorance. . . . Press forward, Go, and gather laurels on the hill of science; linger among her unfading beauties . . . and then join in the march of fame. Become learned and virtuous and you will be great. Love God and serve him, and you will be happy.

Thus inspired, there is no reason to believe that Lincoln, as a good student, did not dutifully and correctly conjugate such sentences as: "John's dog barks" and "Birds repose on the branches of trees." When he encountered heavy going and his New Salem faculty was not immediately available, the youthful Lincoln could turn to the front of the volume wherein lay "A Compendium of English Grammar" covering 35 rules with notes to each. This, he was warned by the author, was "Designed, not to be studied, but to be spread before the learner in parsing, previous to his having the definitions and rules committed to memory."

I have spoken about who taught, or could have taught, Lincoln to read, to write, to spell and to speak with grammatical accuracy. The obvious next step is to inquire into Lincoln's success as a student. How well did he learn to do these things?

As a penman, in the clarity of his writing and the ease with which it may be read, Lincoln is unsurpassed. Throughout his life, from the sum pages written in Indiana to his last writing as President, his handwriting is almost perfectly legible. In fact, Dennis Hanks' pupil could easily have given lessons to some of his highly educated and elegant contemporaries in the Civil War whose scrawled and crabbed manuscripts are a plague to all but the most highly specialized reader. Only one instance of disagreement as to what Lincoln wrote comes to mind. In the closing sentence of his famed and pithy note to Major Ramsay "Wanting to work is so rare a merit, that it should be encouraged." there are those who maintain, and I suppose always will, that merit should be read "want." In penmanship, I say Mr. Lincoln deserves an "A."

However he may have come to learn to read, there is evidence that he developed a taste for reading which lasted throughout his life. Few of his early associates' recollections fail to mention his great desire to read. In Indiana he read such books as *Aesop's Fables*, *The Bible*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and, of course, *Weems' Life of Washington* which he damaged and

paid for by chopping fodder. In New Salem, his tastes broadened to include Shakespeare and Burns, who remained life long favorites. As he grew older there was, of course, less time for recreational reading, but even as President he delighted in the humorous productions of Artemus Ward and Petroleum V. Nasby, and opened one of the most momentous cabinet meetings in our history—that prior to the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation—by reading aloud, “High Handed Outrage at Utica,” a chapter from Artemus Ward. I see no reason to deprive him of another “A.”

Lincoln's Indiana schoolmates recalled his prowess as a speller. All attest to the great advantage which accrued to whatever side Lincoln was on during the “spell downs”; and one, Kate Roby, recalled how he had saved her during one of these contests by silently pointing to his eye when she was asked to spell the word “defied.” In adult life, for which there is written evidence, his spelling was remarkably good, but not quite perfect by any manner of means. The overwhelming majority of his words are correctly spelled, but certain words consistently gave him trouble. “Territory,” for example he frequently spelled without the doubled “r”; “inaugurate” was quite likely to have a surplus of “e’s” and not enough “u’s”; “Fort Sumter” was as likely as not to be spelled with a “p.” A third “A” here.

Mr. Kirkham exhorted his young learners to remember that “punctuation is the art of dividing written composition into sentences or parts of sentences, by points or stops, in order to mark the different pauses which the sense and an accurate pronunciation require.” Lincoln learned this lesson well. His writings are thoroughly, completely, even heavily, punctuated. In fact, his frequent use of commas becomes almost an element of style. They follow not so much prescribed and formal rules for their use but more the natural pauses which would be required if the sentence were spoken rather than written. Perhaps this could be traced to Kirkham's influence, perhaps to his legal background, perhaps to his desire for absolute clarity in his writing—in any event the result is communication of a very high order. The possibility of misunderstanding is indeed remote. This clarity is further reinforced by his frequent underlining of words for emphasis.

Periods sometimes became short dashes in his writing, particularly if he wrote hurriedly. Semicolons, to which Lincoln reportedly referred as “useful little fellows,” he employed liberally. All in all, I think it safe to say that Lincoln could punctuate

a sentence as effectively, if not as formally correct, as it could be done. Another "A."

Who taught Lincoln to read, to write, to spell, and to speak with grammatical accuracy? We are not certain. But I should like to repeat in concluding that one of the most remarkable characteristics of this most remarkable man was his capacity for growth. And notwithstanding the tutors who worked with him, and regardless of when they worked and how and where Lincoln acquired his "Three 'R's," we know that the tasks were well learned by this great and unique man.

NCTE Achievement Awards

Ample evidence that a good many "Johnnies" and "Janies" can read and write effectively is the announcement of the winners and runners-up of the 1959-60 Achievement Awards program of the National Council of Teachers of English.

More than 800 awards were given January 10, 1960, to American high school students who survived a rigid testing and judging program to establish their excellence in English language skills. The awards were made from some 5,000 students who entered the competition.

As bases of decision, these judges received for each student a nomination blank, giving pertinent biographical data; *three* compositions written by the student, including an autobiographical sketch, an impromptu paper, and an out-of-class paper; results of a standardized test of literary awareness; and two supporting letters from a teacher and an administrator.

We extend our congratulations to the following students in Illinois:

WINNERS

Anderson, Robin, Champaign Senior, Champaign
Antman, Judith Carol, Evanston Township, Evanston
Banthin, Jo Marie, Proviso East, Maywood
Block, Robert Paul, South Shore, Chicago
Bonnell, Jane Alice, University of Illinois H.S., Urbana
Burns, Janet Elizabeth, Glenbrook, Northbrook
Curry, David Lee, Lanphier, Springfield
Davis, Lawrence Howard, Sullivan, Chicago
Gadsby, Paula Jo, Waukegan, Waukegan
Gillette, Jean Alice, Galesburg Senior, Galesburg
Green, Joslyn Dorothy, Highland Park, Highland Park
Hurst, David Arthur, Joliet Township, Joliet
King, Robert Alan, Oak Park-River Forest, Oak Park
Mayberry, Patricia Ann, Lyons, Township, LaGrange
Mercier, Lenore Frances, East Leyden Community, Franklin Park
Moomey, Karen Raye, Stephen Decatur, Decatur
Morawetz, Thomas Hubert, Oak Park-River Forest, Oak Park
Olsen, Ellen Louise, Waukegan, Waukegan
Olson, Marguerite Mae, Schurz, Chicago
Pyle, Nicholas Moffett, Libertyville-Fremont, Libertyville
Shawvan, James Henry, Oak Park-River Forest, Oak Park
Sherlock, Helen Mina, Bloom Township, Chicago Heights
Tischler, Judith Rae, South Shore, Chicago

Weideman, Janet Mary, Elgin, Elgin
Zeffren, Joan Ellen, Rock Island, Rock Island

RUNNERS-UP

Cerny, Elizabeth Anne, Riverside-Brookfield, Riverside
Chester, Raymond Craig, MacArthur, Decatur
Detert, Douglas Donald, East Leyden Community, Franklin Park
Dicke, Arnold Arthur, Downers Grove, Downers Grove
Gehlbach, Stephen Hunter, Evanston Township, Evanston
Kolom, Margo Helen, Fenger, Chicago
Krohne, Elizabeth Constance, York Community, Elmhurst
Maxwell, Connie Eugenia, Kewanee, Kewanee
Mayer, Marilyn Jane, York Community, Elmhurst
Miller, Duncan Charles, Glenbrook, Northbrook
Monroe, Rebecca, Lucille, Collinsville, Collinsville
Moore, Anne Lisbeth, Glenbard, Glen Ellyn
Niles, Kathryn, Joliet Township, Joliet
Peterson, Shirley Grace, Riverside-Brookfield, Riverside
Radner, Mary Ann, Evanston Township, Evanston
Smith, Burke William, Oak Park-River Forest, Oak Park
Stallman, Jane Helen, Highland Park, Highland Park
Stolen, Ann Kathryn, Evanston Township, Evanston
Strandberg, Don Alden, Glenbrook, Northbrook
Stryjewski, Marianne, Proviso East, Maywood
Telleen, David Roger, Cambridge Community Unit, Cambridge
Thompson, Carol Lee, Aurora East, Aurora
Thompson, Julia Ann, Alton Senior, Alton
Tomlinson, Marilyn Jane, Rushville, Rushville
Waide, Marilyn Hope, Alton Senior, Alton

